

Managing RittenhouseTown

A National Historic Landmark

The Friends of RittenhouseTown was organized in 1984 to restore the site of the nation's first paper mill. They took on the management of five stone buildings in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, remnants of the historic village of RittenhouseTown. Fourteen years later, after professional research and archeology, RittenhouseTown is a National Historic Landmark (1992), a site significant for its industrial history spanning two centuries.

RittenhouseTown is a charming cluster of 18th- and 19th-century buildings in a wooded glen in northwest Philadelphia. Five houses, a barn, a bake house, and a road along the Monoshone Creek are all that remain of the industrial village that, in the mid-19th century, included several mills and homes, a stone quarry, a Baptist Church, and a schoolhouse.

William Rittenhouse, the German-born founder of the paper mill, immigrated to America in 1689, after working 10 years as a papermaker in Holland. While living in Amsterdam, he married, started a family, and converted to the Mennonite faith. In 1690 Rittenhouse built the first paper mill in British North America. When this mill washed away in a flood around 1700, he constructed a larger mill farther downstream that survived into the age of photography.

The Rittenhouse mill followed the ancient practice of making paper by soaking rags in water and then pounding them into pulp. The fibrous material was then dried into sheets of paper. The mill was close to Germantown, an emerging textile center and good source of rags. The Rittenhouse family manufactured paper on the Monoshone until the early-19th century. After the Civil War, they began selling their land. At this time, the city of Philadelphia started purchasing RittenhouseTown village as part of Fairmount Park. The park commissioners demolished the mills and most of the village structures and ran scenic Lincoln Drive through its center.

Despite these physical losses, the site retained enough integrity to be nominated as a National Historic Landmark, based on its significance as the birthplace of American papermaking, as the birthplace of David Rittenhouse, the first director of the U.S. Mint, and as a rural industrial village site. Board management decisions have focused on its papermaking history, because only one other place in the country tells the papermaking story, a museum in Atlanta, Georgia. Historic RittenhouseTown, Inc. aims to tell the story of this important industry and to serve as an interpretive model for other paper mill sites.

To accomplish these goals, the Board of RittenhouseTown, Inc., has considered whether to reconstruct the paper mill and fully restore the surviving buildings. Many members felt reconstruction of the mill was essential to understanding the site. Currently, a vision plan includes a partial reconstruction based on archeological remains and a photograph of the mill shot before its demolition.

The second mill stood across the stream from a large stone house built by William's son, Claus. Known as the Homestead, the house is RittenhouseTown's earliest surviving structure (1707) and the birthplace of David Rittenhouse. Until recently, the Board planned to restore the Homestead to its original appearance. A 1996 historic structure report on the Homestead, however, underscored the scarce documentation available on the building and the lack of historic fabric. Without sufficient record, preservation—rather

Historic RittenhouseTown, in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, is the site of the nation's first paper mill.



than restoration of the Homestead—has become the preferred alternative.

Research changed the Board's direction on another occasion. The draft vision statement for RittenhouseTown called for all seven buildings to be restored to recreate a colonial village. An historic structure report in 1997, however, concluded one of the houses was built in 1840. Thus, the colonial emphasis was finally modified by factual information. The vision statement now calls for the preservation of the 18th- and 19th-century industrial village.

The Board has sponsored several other kinds of studies for RittenhouseTown. A professionally supervised dig exposed a corner of the paper mill's massive stone foundation. This archeology led to funding for an interpretive design study on the mill site. A master plan for RittenhouseTown mapped out the village's historical and archeological resources. A design firm researched and prepared an excellent exhibit time line for the visitor center, and a research historian prepared a handbook on RittenhouseTown's history. A landscape architect completed a study on the site's access problems, while a museum grant made recommendations for collections' management.

In the future, Historic RittenhouseTown will require additional studies, including a cultural landscape report for a planned wayside trail and historic structure reports for two houses currently

leased to Fairmount Park. Some Board members have been impatient with research that has consumed needed dollars for restoration and interpretation, but the information obtained in this process has allowed the Board to answer critical questions about the site's future.

The Board hopes to expand the papermaking program and interpret the village of RittenhouseTown from the mill's origin to the present. Expansion, however, is currently limited by the site's rural characteristics and its setting. The village's septic system restricts the visitor center to one public toilet. More bathrooms can be added when a sewer line is installed, but estimates to run the line in the village top \$400,000. Public access and parking are limited by the site's hilly contours and its proximity to Lincoln Drive, a fast-moving, but scenic commuter road. Public access also must be considered in the light of neighborhood concerns and the Board's effort to keep cars and buses from traversing the village. The future of Historic RittenhouseTown will thus need the continued cooperation of many diverse professionals, neighbors, community groups, and volunteers who together will determine the future of this National Historic Landmark.

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Scott S. Sheads and Anna von Lunz

Rodman Last of the Seacoast Muzzle-Loaders

The Rodman gun, shown here at Fort McHenry, was the last smoothbore muzzle loader used in American coastal defense during the late-19th century. Photo courtesy Ft. McHenry NMHS.

Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine has the largest surviving collection of Rodman guns in the United States. While the names Dahlgren, Parrot, and Napoleon are synonymous with artillery, few come close to the Rodman, the last of the smoothbore muzzle loaders to guard the American coast during the last half of the 19th century.

Thomas Jackson Rodman, an Army ordnance officer who graduated from West Point in 1837, developed the Rodman gun. Rodman's commission in the Ordnance Department enabled him to study cannon casting methods at the nation's leading foundries.



In February 1844, Rodman was one of several officers and dignitaries who witnessed the firing of the "Peacemaker," a large gun aboard the U.S.S. *Princeton* in the Potomac River near Washington, DC. The gun exploded upon firing, killing the Secretary of War and several others.

This experience prompted Rodman to investigate his own theories about gun casting. Discovering that current manufacturing processes produced structurally-weak guns, Rodman thought that casting solid guns and then boring them out caused structural stresses. Cooling guns from the outside caused the cannon to develop strata of dif-